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AUTHOR Woods, Abigail S.; Delisle, Robert G.
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ABSTRACT

A child's experience with death is really made up of three components: the direct or indirect exposure to a death, the child's perceptions and reactions toward death, and the intervention of a mediating agent (relative, friend, teacher, counselor, the author of a book or poem, or the creator of a movie or television program). The helpfulness or harmfulness of the death experience to the child's emotional and intellectual development depends largely on the intervention of the mediating agent. A series of steps for helping children cope with death when their behavior is dominated by either intellectual or emotional needs includes the following: recognize the cues that indicate the child's needs; state or restate the situation; share feelings; give information that might help the child feel more secure; propose experiences that might contribute to the child's emotional or intellectual resources; and always close a conversation with the possibility that it may continue at some other time. With these steps, a mediating agent can build the intellectual, emotional, and social resources that help the child grow toward independence and strength rather than toward dependence and helplessness. (RL)

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HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH

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Dr. Abigail S. Woods

Dr. Robert G. Delisle

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A child's death experience is really made up of a totality of three components.

First, the direct or indirect exposure to death: Direct exposure is that which children experience first-hand through the death of a person or animal; indirect exposure is that which children experience through television, movie, children's literature and hearsay.

Second, the child himself or herself: There seem to be age-typical perceptions which children have toward death; in addition, children react to death as individuals because of their inheritance and the nature of their experience.

Third, the intervention of a mediating agent or agents: A mediating agent is whoever affects the child's view of a direct or indirect exposure to death in preparing the child for death before it occurs or in helping him/her to cope with death after it occurs. A mediating agent can be a relative, a friend, a teacher, a counselor, the author of a book or poem, or the creator of a movie or television program.

The totality of a death experience is never a neutral one for a child. It is, in fact, helpful or harmful to the child's development.

The helpfulness or harmfulness of a death experience is dependent upon all three components previously described; but, largely upon the intervention of the mediating agent or agents.

If the intervention of the mediating agent is to contribute to the helpfulness of the death experience to the child's development, rather than to its harmfulness, the mediating agent must see his/her role as that of meeting the child's intellectual, emotional, and social needs, as that of being immediately supportive; but, also, that of acting to the child's intellectual, emotional, and social resources: building a "bank" against which the child can draw in coping with future death exposures.

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While it is difficult to separate intellectual, emotional, and social needs from each other, we will attempt to do so to clarify the role of a mediating agent.

When a child attempts to cope with a death exposure, his perception of death is at some point on a developmental continuum and his behavior, which is an attempt at coping with the death exposure, tends to be dominated by either intellectual needs or emotional needs.

This behavior, in addition to being dominated by either intellectual needs or emotional needs, always has an underlying social needs factor: the death has separated a living being from the child's society and the intervention of a mediating agent is a social intercourse.

When Intellectual Needs Dominate the Child's Behavior:

...a child has not been exposed to the direct death of an animal or person, and is not responding in an emotional manner to an indirect exposure to death, yet shows some interest and curiosity

When Emotional Needs Dominate the Child's Behavior:

...a child has been exposed to the direct death of an animal or person who is close to him/her, or is responding in an emotional manner to an indirect exposure to death

Now, let's be more specific about your role as a mediating agent. Your role should have as its goal

> the building of intellectual/emotional/social resources so that the child can grow toward independence rather than total dependence, strength rather than helplessness

Certain steps seem appropriate if you, as the mediating agent, are to accomplish this...

When Intellectual Needs Dominate:

1. Recognize the child's cue

The cue can be verbal, "Did you see Grandpop's bones?" or "Why do people get buried when they die?" or it can be non-verbal, as in listening intently to an adult conversation about someone's death or carefully observing a dead mouse. A cue can also be your knowledge that a child has been exposed to death through television, movie, literature, or hearsay.

When Emotional Needs Dominate:

1. Recognize the child's cue

When a child is feeling an emotional reaction to death, his/her cue will probably be a change from, or an exaggeration of his/her regular behavior. The talkative child might become very quiet; the active child might become very still. Another child might throw toys, slam doors. Still another child might burst into tears or try to be very close to an adult. The child may also be able to state his/her feeling or "play" it out with dolls, puppets, blocks.

2. Be physically supportive

This does not mean creating an artificial environment or a physical relationship between a child and you which has never before been experienced and with which you and/or the child would feel uncomfortable. It does mean doing what has been physically acceptable in past supportive experience, or, what you think would be acceptable now:

- stroking a child's hair
- patting his/her shoulder
- rocking him/her
- sitting with the child on your lap or closeby

This behavior should say, "I know you hurt and I care."

2. State or Restate the Situation

If the child makes a statement or asks a question about death, you can simply restate it. If the child asks, "Do people die when they get wrinkled?" you might restate, "You wonder if people die when they get wrinkled." If you suspect that the child is interested or curious about a death he/she has been exposed to (perhaps seeing the movie Bambi) you might state, "You know that Bambi's mother died." Such stating/restating clarifies what is to be dealt with and gives you a minute to organize your thoughts for the next step; it also lets the child know that you are open to dealing with the topic of death.

3. State or Restate the Situation

This step is one borrowed from therapists and can be utilized whether a child has verbalized his emotions or whether you happen to know (or can make a good guess). A child might say, "I feel bad (sad, angry) that Grandpop died." You would restate, "You feel bad (sad, angry) that your Grandpop died." When the child has said nothing, but you've recognized his/her cuing, you can make the same kind of statement. Such stating/restating implies sympathy and extends support without evaluation. It is an indication that the child has feelings and that he/she is alright to feel as he/she does.

4. Share Feelings

The emphasis, here, is on sharing: your feelings as well as the child's. It is important to the child to know that his/her feelings (whatever they are) are acceptable to the adult; that it is o.k. to feel bad, sad, angry about death. It is important for you to refrain from denying the opportunity for sharing feelings, or the feeling once it is said. It is denying to say, "You don't really feel angry that Grandpop died."; you are saying that the child is incorrect, that he/she is not alright to have such a feeling. Sharing your feelings provides a model: you, too, have feelings and share them.

5. Give Information Which Might Help the Child Feel More Secure

A child will probably need two kinds of "supportive" information from you: 1) That which would help any child regardless of developmental level (varying only in depth, vocabulary): information about the funeral; how significant other's needs will be met; who will be available to meet the child's needs...2) That which would vary according to the child's developmental perception of death: information which should facilitate developmental progression without forcing it; correct information, rather than incorrect information to "reassure", as "Grandpop went on a vacation."

3. Propose Experiences Which Might Contribute to the Child's Intellectual Needs and Resources

6. Propose Experiences Which Might Contribute to the Child's Emotional Needs and Resources

Possible experiences: a related movie, television program, children's story or poem, crayons and paper for drawing about the death experience, dolls, puppets, blocks

Whatever the experience: In order to be considered for presentation to a child, whether you are dealing with dominant intellectual or emotional needs, an experience should be examined in relation to whether it contributes to the child's intellectual, emotional, and social needs and resources:

1) Intellectual Needs and Resources - Does the experience (including your own conversation) provide the child with correct information?
2) Emotional Needs and Resources - Does the experience (including your own conversation) provide feedback that the child is alright and that he/she is taken care of?
3) Social Needs and Resources - Does the experience (including your own conversation) provide feedback that the child is sharing an experience?

4. Close the Conversation While Suggesting the Possibility of Reopening

7. Close the Conversation While Suggesting the Possibility of Reopening

It may be the child or you whose timing indicates closure; closure is not harmful so long as there is the possibility (and reality) of another time. If the timing for closure is the child's, he will probably change the subject or get up and leave. You should recognize this behavior for what it is: the point of saturation (either intellectually or emotionally) has been reached. A child cannot deal endlessly with any issue; his/her style tends to be to end, and to repeat or add more later. You would do well not to feel pressed to continue on; another time will come.

The timing may be yours: the child wants to go on and on when there are other things you wish to do; the conversation has become more intrusive that you wish to deal with; you need to get some distance to deal with your feelings/thoughts; an "end" just seems right. A convenient way of closing is to return to the initial statement: "You think alot about why people die...we can talk more tomorrow, if you like. It is time for math now." or "You're sad that Grandpop died. Me too; let's talk more about it tomorrow."

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